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among the
Old Masters



With Introduction
and
Comment

by
W.D. Howell

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A Little Girl

among the Old Masters

WITH INTRODUCTION AND COMMENT

By W. D. HOWELLS



BOSTON

TICKNOR AND COMPANY

1886

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BY W. D. HOWELLS.

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THE pictures in this book are the work of a little girl of ten years, who made them without instruction, without suggestion from any one else, and quite without help or criticism. They are wholly her own in grouping and composition, and are in no case copies, even in the study of single figures or attitudes; they are simply the reflection, in a child's soul, of the sweetness and loveliness of early Italian art; and they have been reproduced here with the hope that at least their utter sincerity and unconsciousness may please.

Some of her ingenuous explanations of intention in this or that sketch have been remembered and set down, but most of them have been forgotten; and these are only a small part of her drawings, which were done two or three a day, when she came in from the

churches and galleries, and curled herself up in an arm-chair, with the memorandum-block, on which she made them, in her lap.

Before going abroad last year she had begun to make a graphic record of facts and fancies that pleased her, especially in the æsthetic craze and the burlesques of it: she also drew animals in character, and occasionally attempted something from life, notably an interesting family of pigs, whose acquaintance she made in the country. In London, from some obscure association of ideas, she drew exclusively Puritans and Pilgrims. During the long indoors weather of the rainiest of Swiss autumns she amused herself with sketches in the Kate Greenaway taste. When she reached Florence, however, the poetry of mediæval art enraptured her, and the studies here partly given began.

The finer influences at first were alloyed by those of the Christmas cards just then received in great numbers from America, and they are about equally to be felt in the two groups of Angels with Olive-branches, and Angels Dancing in a Ring; yet in these, as in all the other sketches, the design is wholly her own; the colossal spray of lilies of the valley being introduced into the latter from a bouquet which happened to be on the table when the artist was at work. She meant to draw a different angel on the right, and the original face is still there. At this time, I think she had a secret ambition to compete for Mr. Prang's prizes; but it passed with the holiday season, and left her free to the pursuit of "art for art's sake."

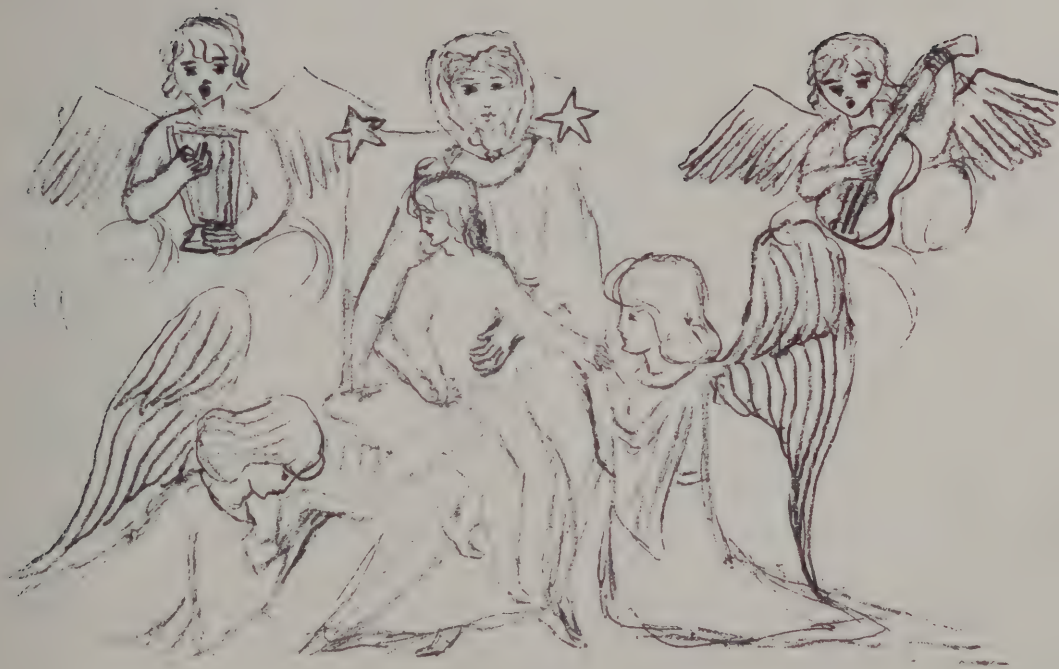




Something of the spirit of the art which she began to see everywhere about her makes itself more distinctly felt in the sketch of Angels playing to the Sleeping Child, where the child sleeps on with a divine impassibility amidst the heavenly rumor of wind and stringed instruments usual in the mediæval pictures. This was done some time about Epiphany, when the boys go through the streets of the beautiful old town, blowing long, slender trumpets of glass, like those we see levelled from the lips of angels in the frescos of the convents and churches: and the trumpet here, I am pretty sure, was studied from one which was given her brother for his seasonable equipment; it did not outlast Twelfth Night, when it was used, and it survives only in effigy.

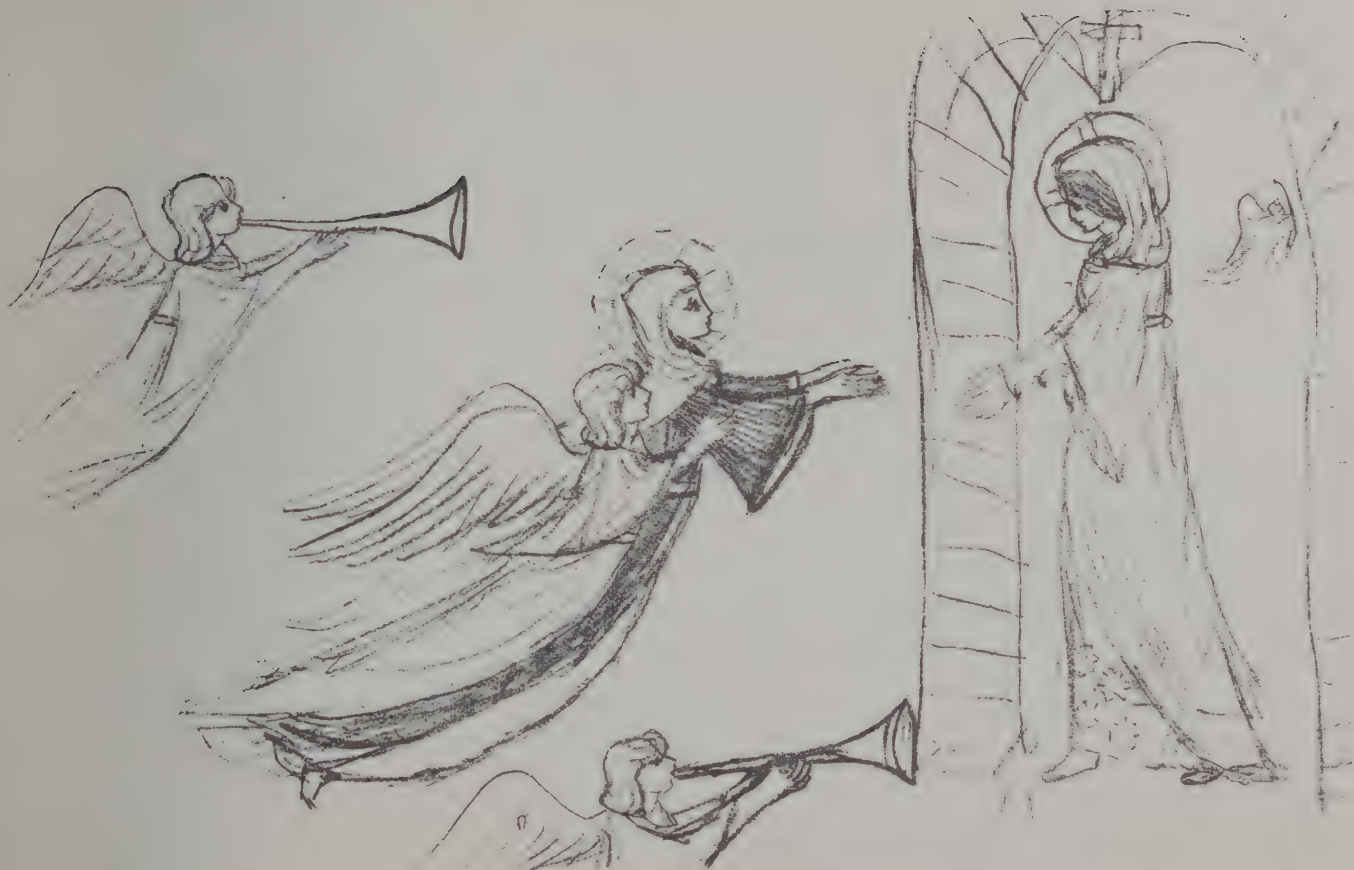


In Her First Madonna, the decorative touch in the stars tipping the corners of the Virgin's chair is clearly caught from Fra Angelico, the master who was first to please her fancy, and to color it; though she came later to weary of his manner, and to denounce it with startling frankness. The artist here encounters her earliest difficulty in portraying the Bambino, whom she could not make look like a child for a long time.



Early in February the little girl's family went for a month to Siena; and there the local school, but more especially the story of St. Catharine as she found it painted and printed, vividly impressed her. St. Catharine, indeed, became the patroness to whom she now dedicated nearly all her efforts, and appeared and reappeared in many actual and imagined phases of her career. Among her first studies of the subject is The Madonna receiving St. Catharine in Heaven, where the Florentine Epiphany trumpets are seen again at the mouths of the attendant angels; but the haloes of the saint and the Madonna are of the fashion of those always attributed to Catharine in Siena. This sketch must have been done before the little girl mastered the idea of the mystical gift of the

*stigmata, which long had a great fascination for her. She had
"always heard of the stigmata," she says; but she did not know
what it was till she went to Siena.*



The prints of the nails are first seen in St. Catharine's Apparition to a Young Priest; and they appear in this, not only in St. Catharine's hands and feet, but in the feet of the saint in the picture over the altar. The priest's dress was promptly studied from an ecclesiastical vestment just then picked up at a bric-à-brac shop by the little girl's mother "for the sake of the color." In this picture she wishes it understood that the angel with the cup is "merely sprinkling holy water around," but is not sprinkling St. Catharine, as might be supposed.



The family were lodged in an old palace, in an apartment which they took of an ex-monk of the suppressed Convent of Monte Oliveto; and, besides the suggestion of Sienese art everywhere, there was a great deal of talk about priests and monks and nuns, which must have entered into the little girl's reveries, to be expressed again in her own way. Sometimes it came out in long histories, as of the young girl who resolved, in five or six tableaux, to be a nun against her mother's will; but mostly it appeared in scenes from the life of St. Catharine, as where she Reproves Some Nuns for their Idle Life, and tells them to go and feed the Poor, with rather a threatening management of her lily, as it might seem; though really the lily is put across her shoulder in that way "so as not to hide her face."



This favorite saint revisits the little girl's fancies again and again, and she is never quite superseded in her affection by any other. St. Catharine comforting a Sick Nun, St. Catharine as she differently appears to the Nuns and the Fashionable Rich, and St. Catharine appearing to a Young Priest who is dying, testify among others not given to the piety of her votary; and she triumphs at last in a striking and entirely original conception, executed much later, of The Child espousing St. Catharine of Alexandria and St. Catharine of Siena, both! The former is represented with a palm, because that means martyrdom; and she is "trampling on her earthly crown, because she has renounced it for a crown of thorns." St. Catharine of Siena "has no palm, because she was not martyred." The Child is



shown looking upwards, instead of down at his mystic brides, "because he has the same recommendation for them both,"—which is interpreted to mean that he must not look at one more than another.

Another subject which employed the little girl's pencil a great deal at this time was The Slaughter of the Innocents, so repeatedly and so vividly treated by the Sienese artists. The family work-table was at one time strewn with leaves from the memorandum-block made ghastly by her studies of this tremendous theme in all its horror; but she afterwards condemned them (including a harrowing slaughter, where one of the mothers goes mad) as "too murderous," and none are reproduced here.

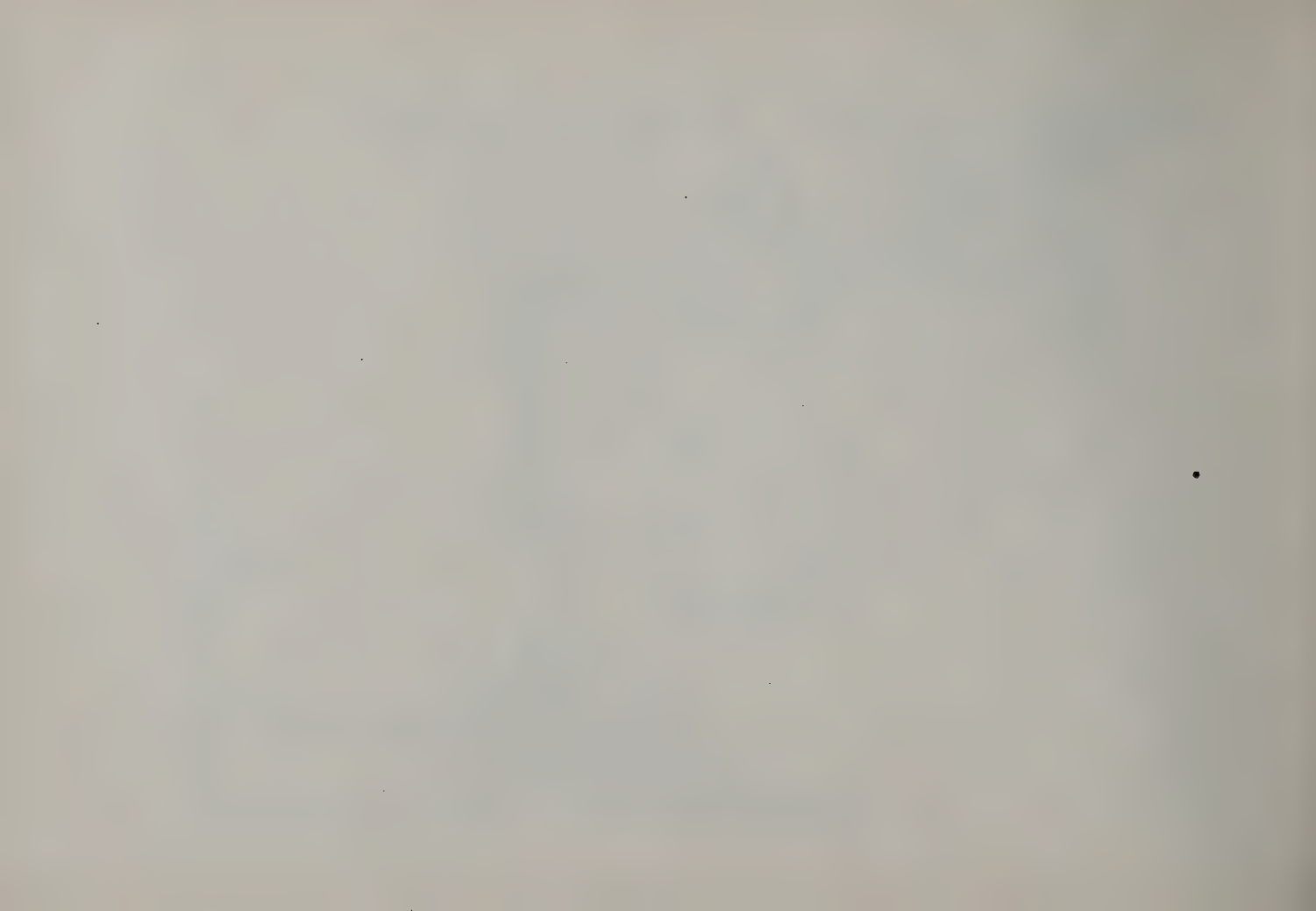
When the family returned to Florence, the little girl read Mrs. Jameson's "Sacred and Legendary Art," and Mrs. Clement's "Handbook of Mythological and Legendary Art," and began at once to realize with her pencil their stories of saints and martyrs, and gods and heroes. In the sketches she threw off it is hard to say how much suggestion she got from the Fra Angelicos, the Botticellis, the della Robbias, the Gozzolis, and the Lippo Lippis which she was all the time seeing in the churches and galleries, and how much she imagined of herself from what she read. She has never quite liked to have it said that any of these masters influenced her work; but, without wounding a just amour propre (which will deal very severely with this commentary), I may say that I think this Madonna letting



down her Girdle to Thomas *would not perhaps have been done, but for a treatment of the same subject by Luca della Robbia in the chapel of the Convent of Osservanza at Siena. The action and the detail, however, are her own, I believe, especially the management of the Madonna's veil; and, in the profuse employment of the stars and crescents, it belongs to an extremely decorative series, where these heavenly bodies are lavished in unsparing opulence.*

The stars are sometimes conventionalized, as in the robe of the angel reclining at the edge of the fountain in The Madonna of the Pomegranate, where an ideal of grace and ease is achieved at the cost of some imaginable inconvenience to the angelic anatomy, but where, I am sure, the pretty facts of detail will please. Observe the little head blowing the stream of the fountain from a trumpet; and the cat-tail rushes, introduced from an American swamp into this august subject as unconsciously as the masters employed the Italian trees and flowers in their sacred stories. The sketch derives its title from the pomegranate which another angel is bringing to the Madonna, and from the fruit, growing appositely low, which she herself apparently plucks from a tree, whose stem is decorated with ivy.





The little girl thought she had been uncommonly successful with the Child; and, when she brought the drawing to her fondest admirer, she asked him if the Bambino, "putting up his hands that way, didn't look like a perfect little rogue? She is holding the pomegranate away, and he's trying to tease her for it." The fountain "is a sort of neglected fountain, so that the rushes grow out of the side."

To a somewhat later date—a week or two later—belongs the dramatic composition of St. Catharine presenting a Maiden to the Madonna, and St. Dorothea presenting a Child whom an Angel crowns. In this the growing power of effective grouping mingles with a childish quaintness, which I hope the reader will not miss. Where Sta. Lucia and St. Cecilia are embracing on the right, the former saint, who suffered exoculation, has neatly deposited her eyes in a plate at her feet, and the latter has set down a harp not much bigger than the accompanying tambourine. The Madonna's crown seems something rather new in that sort: and, on the left, St. Michael with the sword and scales is apparently lost in a pleasing sense of his personal magnificence; he is fledged with peacock-plumes



(as has been explained to me), "to add to his splendor." In his scales is seen a very small human soul, being weighed against his own sins. As it is very difficult to draw sins, in any recognizable form, the other side of the balance was purposely left out of the picture.

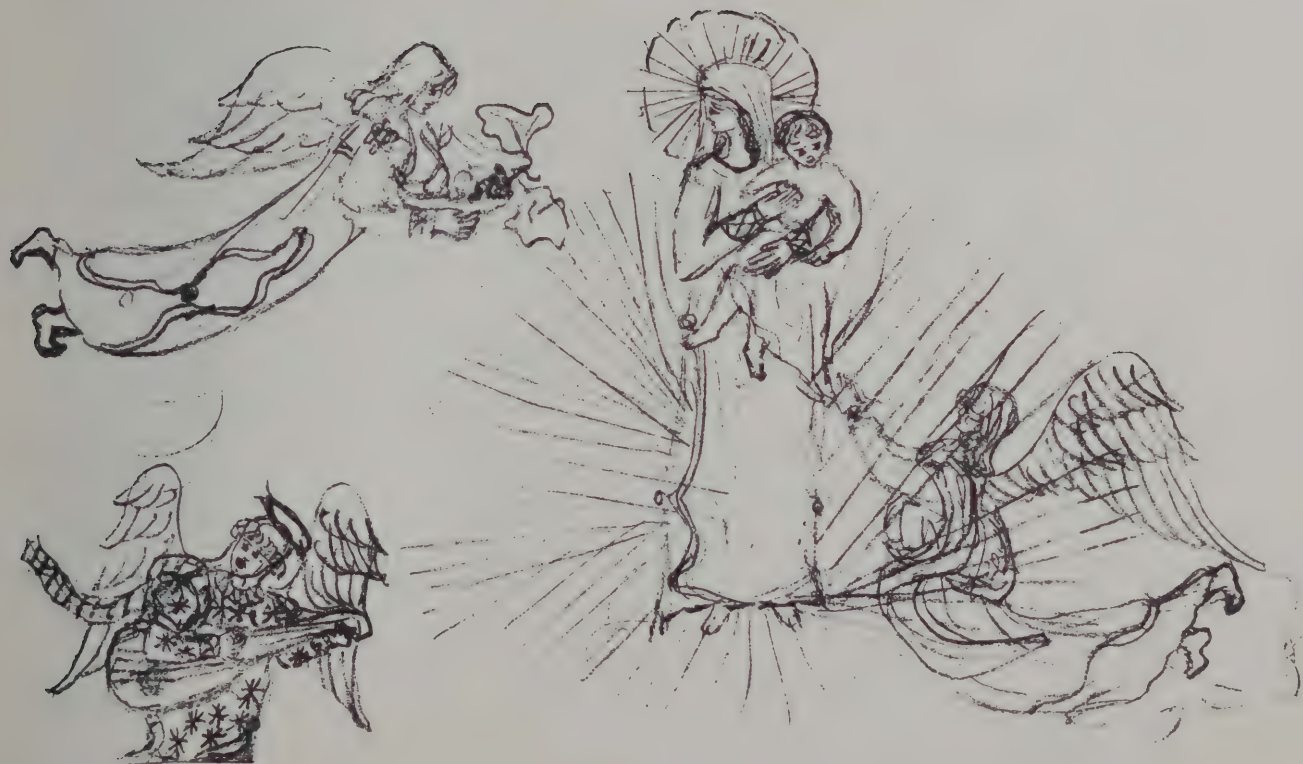
He is equipped with the same plumage in the next picture,—St. Michael weighing a Soul in his Scales,—where he has been studied with an even greater delight in his splendor, if that were possible. I confess that his air of fastidious scrupulosity here has been very satisfying to me: he is depicted with the manner, not only of a seraph, but a fine gentleman. In this picture the Soul is weighed, not against its own sins, but against the soul of “a bad person” in the other scale, who will be readily known by his bat’s wing, introduced for purposes of identification.



St. Michael forgets his magnificence quite as little in the following picture, where The Child presents the Scales to St. Michael. The artist invented this subject, because, as she said, she "was tired of seeing pictures of St. Michael presenting the scales to the Child."



In Angels adoring the Madonna, the decorative feeling is present again in the golden rays enveloping the Madonna, and the starry-robed angel with the mandolin; but this feeling is stronger still in the treatment of the succeeding picture.



Concerning this, The Coronation of the Madonna, where the crown, with the dove perching on it, is borne by the wounded hands, the little girl explains that she wished to have in the whole figure of Christ, but she did not believe she could draw it, and so she "thought the hands would do." In this picture she seems to have been uplifted above her art by her sense of the solemnity of the theme; and there is a like rapture in the next, where the growing sense of beauty expresses itself.



She calls it, The Madonna coming down between Two Angels swinging Censers; and she explains, "I suppose she's in a vision," — that is, seen in a vision by some worshipper. She thought this the sweetest figure she had yet drawn, the robe being specially designed for this Madonna. After drawing the face, the artist "meant to make some other kind of hair to it, but that kind came of itself: that curl in front would insist upon coming down."



Of the Madonna of the Orphans, she says that it was imagined, "because there were so many other kinds of Madonnas;" and the subject is thus wholly hers. She seems, in fact, to have had an ideal of her own, which she developed independently of specific influences; and, except that her little studies are clearly done in an environment of mediæval thought and art, they have an original character, which is readily perceived.



This seems true (in spite of the evident inspiration of its treatment by Fra Angelico) of the sketch she calls A Youthful Monk borne to Heaven by Angels, and shown in the moment of entering the gate of paradise, while two of his angelic escort float off to the right: the scene is fancied with a wholly childlike grace and life of movement, in the light touch of those angels' hands, and the free play of their inadequate feet; the starry embroidery on the neck and sleeves of the prettiest angel's garments is superadded out of her desire to make him as fine as possible.



It was charming to see how the little girl's skill increased from day to day, and almost from hour to hour, through a sense of beauty which was not less than a passion. She seemed to love these little creations of her pencil, and to make them pretty because she loved them; and she had an innocent pride in her pictures, which no praise could vulgarize into vanity. If you liked them, she was very glad; and, if you did not see all their loveliness, she was willing to point it out, and share in your enjoyment. She wished to materialize the forms and faces that filled her reveries; and her ambition to try something new and difficult in the pose of a figure, the turn of a head, the spirit of an action, the expression of a face, or the decorative character of a group and its accessories, mounted with each

step of her progress. She instinctively wrought in the artistic way; and, when puzzled by some of the attitudes she was seeking to give, she begged one and another of the family to stand for her, and drew it from nature. At other times she says she took the pose herself, and then (as she explains) she "saw how the positions felt." But, when the work was done, she cared nothing for it, except for the pleasure it gave her admirers; and it was their piety, not her concern, which saved the little pieces, and put them together in the large volume they fill. On her studies of the Madonna she lavished the utmost resources of her art; but there were several saints to whom she was almost as partial, especially Cecilia and Dorothea. She knew their histories perfectly, and represented them in every

event of their sufferings and triumphs, with a constancy to fact that was thoroughly mediæval, and an unfailing accuracy in the attribution of the proper token. When her editor happened to forget, as he sometimes did amid other cares, what the basket of flowers meant in St. Dorothea's hand, he was promptly put to shame with, "Don't you know? It's the basket of flowers that the angel brought down when the scornful young nobleman asked Dorothea to send him some from heaven just before she was put to death!"

She is represented with this basket in Sts. Dorothea, Cecilia, and Barbara welcoming Sta. Lucia to Heaven, where it has been explained to me that Sta. Lucia has given her palm and her eyes on a plate to the little angel behind her to hold, "so as not to be encumbered when she embraces St. Barbara," who in turn has stuck her palm into the top of her tower in order to leave herself equally free.



In St. Cecilia playing with a Chorus of Angels, the convenience of the saint, who rests her harp on the head of an angel, has in like manner been studied: "You know, she had to have something to support her harp upon."



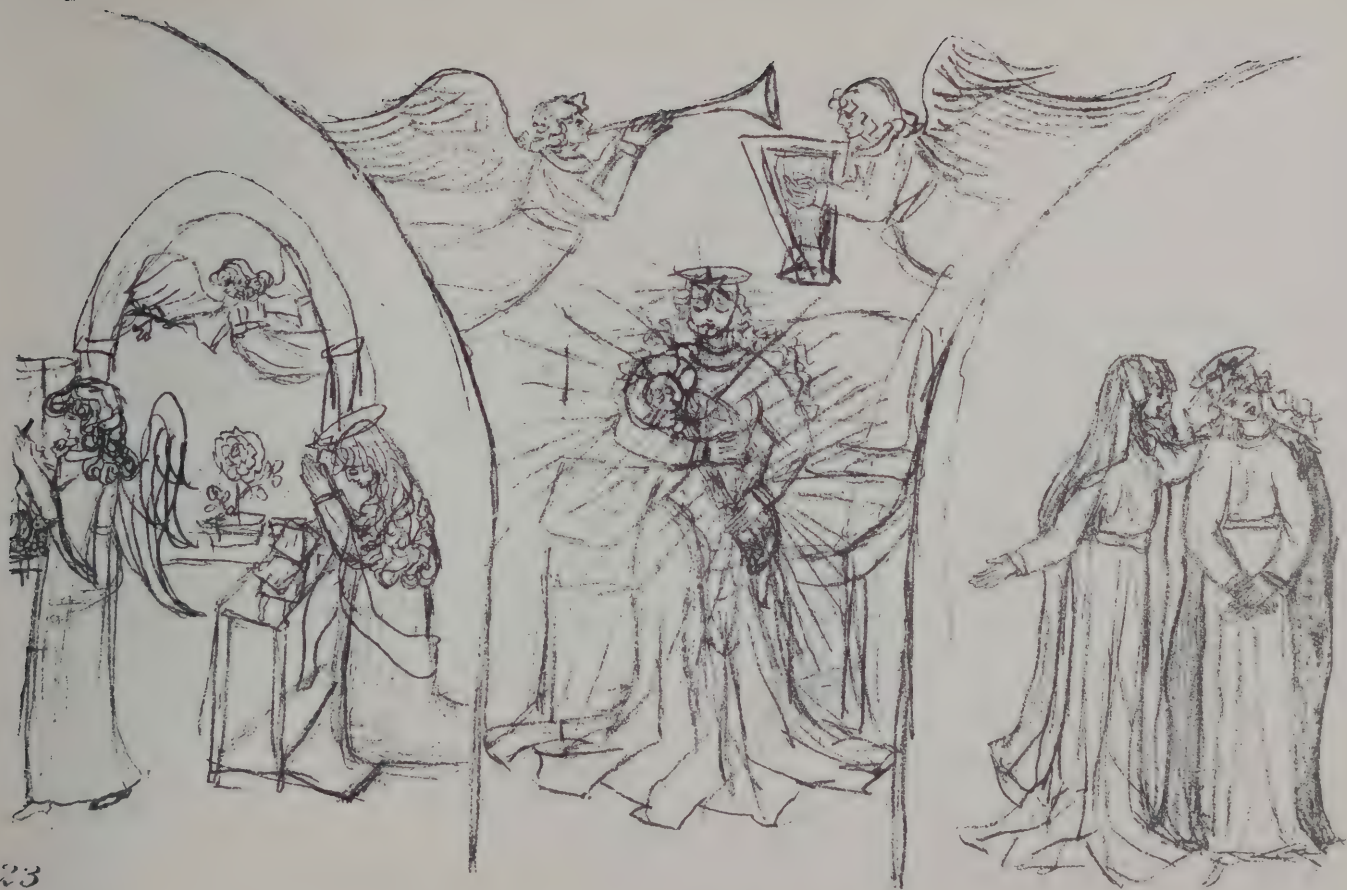
The idea is repeated in St. Dorothea,—the Glorification. Here the artist's touch becomes much freer, especially in the drapery of St. Dorothea, than it has hitherto been. She was, in fact, then approaching the cinque cento in her manner; but we must go back a little to follow her special studies of the Madonna in their order,—explaining first, however, that it is not St. Cecilia who is here resting her harp on the head of that submissive little cherub, but merely a musical angel of no special note.



The Annunciation was a subject which she attempted in a variety of ways, sometimes in connection with other facts of the Virgin's history (as in the two triptychs representing Events in the Life of the Madonna, where an archaic simplicity of spirit mingles with the new freedom of touch), and sometimes in separate studies.

In the first of the triptychs she thinks it had better be explained that it is a flame which the angel of the Annunciation on the left has on his forehead, and that Fra Angelico often put it there. The Child in the centre is shown large because "it is just before he goes to the temple." A very small Annunciation and a Nativity are introduced in the curtain behind the Madonna.

In the second triptych of Events in the Life of the Madonna she is represented with a perplexed countenance in the scene of the Visitation, because, as the little girl says, she was "troubled about all these things." On the left, where she is praying, an attendant angel is seen "doing her work for her."



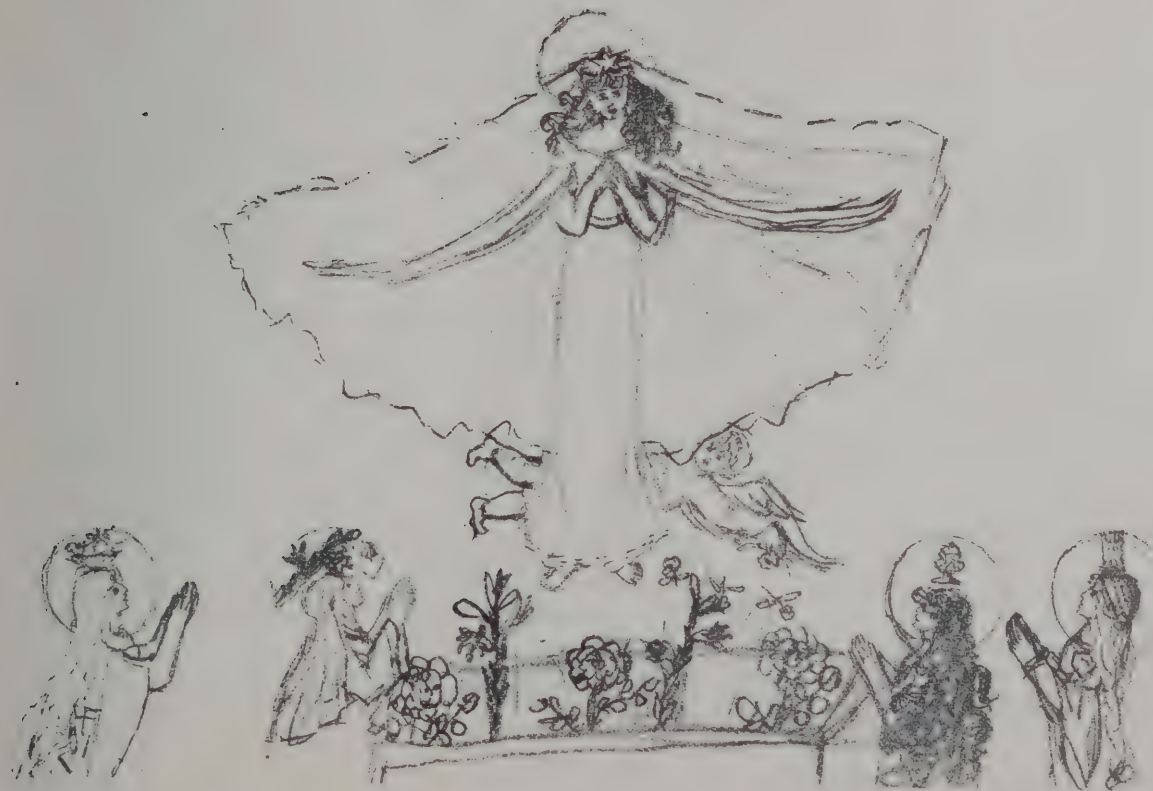
In The Angel of the Annunciation, the subject is very seriously felt, and treated with tender dignity. The little girl thought she would draw the angel kneeling on one knee upon the clouds: he is hailing the Virgin with his outstretched hand, and he was meant to have some such word as "Gloria" written inside of his halo.



In the next picture of the Annunciation, where a great part of the heavenly host seem sent upon this mission to the Madonna, the artist says, that, in the beginning, she "wished to see if she could make a face looking up, and then she just grouped the angels round the Virgin." The angels are all crowned with lilies; the Dove of the Holy Spirit has a stalk of lilies in its beak; and the angel who bears the harp, and cannot carry the lily in his hand, has it tied to the corner of his instrument.



The Assumption, which follows, is noticeable for an original and decorative management of the Madonna's veil, on which the artist rather prided herself; though she pleased herself chiefly with the floating cherub behind the Virgin,—who drops a rose into the empty tomb,—and with the successful introduction of the emblems of her favorite saints. She has put inside of their respective haloes the basket of flowers of St. Dorothea, the lily of St. Catharine of Siena, the box of ointment of St. Mary Magdalene, and the tower of St. Barbara,—a new treatment altogether. In the tower of St. Barbara you can even see the three windows which the saint opened there in honor of the Trinity.



The Madonna resting the Child on an Angel's Back shows in its treatment that the little girl has seen the pictures of the Venetian school. She was taken to Venice in the spring, and at once began a rapturous study of Titian and Tintoretto and Paul Veronese, who moved her to some efforts in color hitherto unattempted except in a purely decorative way. She says that at Venice she found out that Botticelli and some of her other Florentine favorites "had neither form nor color, but only feeling;" whereas "the Venetians had form and color, and feeling too." In this picture she has represented the Child with a pomegranate in his hand, because she thinks the pomegranate "signifies eternal life."



The Venetian influence is apparent in the Annunciation of the Death of the Madonna and in The Death of the Madonna. In the former it is the angel Gabriel who is giving the Madonna the branch of olive which is to be carried before her at her funeral; and the Madonna is shown with a broken heart, and the handkerchief in her hand with which she has been drying her tears. The little girl says she is "not certain whether they had handkerchiefs in those days;" but she knows they had napkins, and so she has ventured to give the Madonna a handkerchief.



In The Death of the Madonna, the angel who is crowned with Annunciation lilies holds a crucifix in one hand and a Bible in the other, and is meant in these emblems to summarize the history of the Saviour.



At Venice the decay of the art also struck her, and she was not content till she had sketched what she called A Barocco Madonna. She did this "just to see whether she could draw a Barocco Madonna," and not at all because she liked that kind of art. She attempted it one day after seeing a fresco by Tiepolo, in which the Madonna gives her rosary to some poor people stricken with the plague. The angel on the right has her hair dressed with jewels, after the fashion of so many angels of Venice; and that on the left is in armor,—a kind of seraph that interested and puzzled the little girl a good deal. She "thought she would put one of that kind in here."



In the reverently studied Repentance of Mary Magdalene, the little girl says that she meant the scene to be where Mary anoints the Saviour's feet with the precious ointment, and wipes them with her hair. She intended to introduce the figures of the other persons present at the feast, and she has drawn Christ with the cross in his hand in prophecy of the crucifixion. The picture belongs to the Florentine period, as does also —



That of Mary Magdalene at the Tomb, where the Saviour appears to her while she is at prayer. She turns to him without rising from her knees; but he forbids her to touch him, since he has not yet ascended. The little girl thought she had realized in this and the foregoing sketch the devout intention with which she had attempted them.



Sta. Lucia with Lamp and Palm *is again Venetian in feeling.*
The artist has told me that she "doesn't understand exactly why
Lucia has the lamp, but it's supposed to be the sacred light. Lucia
means light, doesn't it?"



Still another effect of the Venetian school is in the picture of the stately and gracious St. Ursula preaching to her Maidens. "You know, she gathered them together in a grassy meadow, and proposed going to the different shrines," said the little girl in explanation.



The many examples of the Byzantine school likewise impressed her at Venice; and, from the same sort of whim that prompted the Barocco Madonna, she attempted what she called "Kind of a Byzantine Madonna — especially the Baby," in the figure of which she thought she had achieved the true ecclesiastical stiffness.



From time to time she essayed classic themes, which she found in her mythology, or saw treated by the masters, or imagined for herself. Of these the study of Fauns and Nymphs and the Apollo and Daphne were done in Florence. In the former the fauns are shown with the leopard-skins which they liked to wear; on the left of the dancing-group a nymph is crowning a faun with flowers; on the right, one of the sylvan creatures hangs lightly by one hand to the bough of a tree, while he offers, with the other, the wild grapes he has plucked from it for the nymph, who catches them in her apron. The position is apparently not fatiguing to the faun, but a strict æstheticism might perhaps condemn it as too vivid an appeal to the spectator's sympathy.



In the Apollo and Daphne the artist wishes me to observe, that Daphne is not turning into "a great big laurel-tree," as she is usually shown in escaping from the god; she thinks that is not so pretty as to have her growing into small laurel-bushes; and it is her idea to have a number of laurels springing up around the nymph, and helping to hide her.



The subject of The Fates is one which she was inspired to treat by reading a history of Greece after her return to America; and she is disposed to like what she did, because of the statuesque character and classic sentiment of the group.



I do not know whether I ought to class with the three foregoing the Worship of the Golden Calf, which was one of the first-fruits of her return to London, or whether there is something sordid in the conditions of our Anglo-Saxon civilization, moving a mind which has fed upon the glories of Italian art to reprehensive expression. I venture these remarks without the privity of the artist, who is jealous for the dignity of this publication, and has allowed me to write of her work, only with the understanding that I will "not make fun." She has told me that the maiden on the left is resisting the idolatrous temptation, while all the rest are abandoning themselves to it. She has also confided, that the calf is shown in the partial manner we see, because "the paper would not hold it, and because she was not sure she could draw a calf."



She had the habit of telling with her pencil the romances she made up; and there are a dozen different stories which she narrated in this way,—among others that of Prince Guido and Princess Lillian, in seven pictures; The Adventures of a Little Tambourine Girl adopted by a Rich Lady, in five; the tribulations and triumphs of The Greek Maiden whom her Father wished to marry to a Turk, in eight. This maiden escapes the dismal fate to which she has been dedicated by seeking the protection of a young nobleman, eventually her husband: and, in the picture I give, she is seen fleeing from her father's palace by night, with her slippers in her hand, and looking fearfully back over her shoulder; the sentinel drowzes at his post, and one of her damsels lies sunk in slumber at the foot of the pillar.



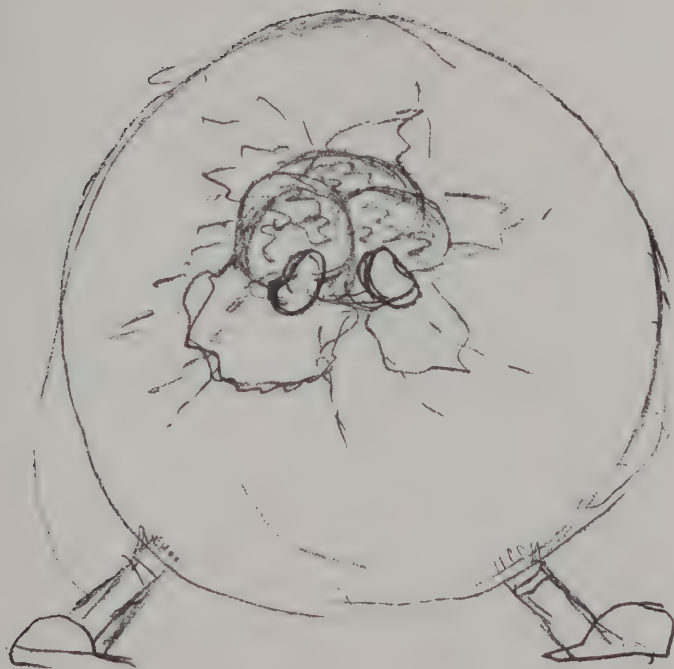
From the myth, which the little girl herself invented, concerning the mortal maid who "thoughtlessly prayed to be able to fill the jug of the god who waters the earth," I give one illustration. "The goddess appears, brings her to the upper regions, and makes her fill the jug. Becoming tired, she prays the goddess to send her home the quickest way possible. The angry goddess sends her;" and we see her in her headlong fall through space, past all the celestial spheres.



The very decorative group which she called "Just Making Love," is one of many things which she threw off merely for the constant pleasure she found in the use of her pencil.



She was not at the circus in Florence; but, inspired by her brother's description of it, she dashed off, as a reminiscence of a circus which she had seen in America, The Clown's Flight through the Paper Hoop, even to the hands and the jockey-caps of the supers who held it up.



Now and then she came home and set down some street-scene that had caught her fancy, like a passing group of School-boys in Siena, who amused her because they looked like little priests.



One day, in the Duomo at Florence, she stood watching a file of youthful choristers as they crossed the nave, singing; and, when she could reach her memorandum-block, she sketched them, adding the angel out of her love for the subject, and explaining that he was "sort of poking them along."



Occasionally she reverted to earlier themes, as in the sketch of Puritans singing Christmas Hymns, according to their well-known custom.



She has attempted several purely mystical compositions, of which the Meeting of Husbands and Wives in Heaven — “you can tell the wives by their long hair” — is one of the most characteristic. Two of the personages are seen in the act of leaving the tomb. She imagined this picture while she was still in Florence; but —



The Spirit of his Deceased Wife drinking out of the Same Cup with him *was done during the sojourn of the family on their way home, in London; and I cannot help thinking that it was, however remotely and obscurely, suggested by the talk the artist heard all around her about the Deceased Wife's Sister's Bill, then before the Lords; though Rossetti's picture of The Loving-cup, which she had seen, had, no doubt, also something to do with it.*



On the voyage home to America, she sketched on shipboard A Milkmaid lured away by Fays and Elves. The scene was laid in Wales, because her father had recently paid a visit there, and because "Wales is full of fairies, you know." As she had just finished reading "Little Dorrit" at the time, she threw in, out of the abundance of her fancy, a study of Mr. F.'s Aunt, who is seen poised on the milkmaid's arm, in the characteristic moment of saying, "There are milestones on the Dover road."



During the voyage she also sketched the group of a Sister of Charity succoring Poor Children. One of these friendless little ones is supposed to be kissing the relic of a saint which the Sister offers her.



The Miraculous Draught of Fishes was something that naturally occurred to her in connection with the sea; and she was found drawing it, one day, in the state-room.



Her latest subject, up to the present time, is one comprehensively entitled, The Angel of Mercy praying for Souls; the Madonna patronizing her — just come along; St. Cecilia singing around. "Not that language, exactly," adds the little girl, with perhaps some misgiving about the use of the word "patronizing:" nevertheless, I give it.



This was preceded a few days by an Angel of the Annunciation descending with the Dove, and a Saint coming along between Two Angels. The angel on the right of the saint is not yet introduced, and I fear that the reader must finally be left to imagine it; for when the little girl's editor, corrupted by his habits of "making copy," demanded that the lacking figure should be drawn in, she explained that probably she should never draw it. "But why?" "Because I'm not the same as I was that night"—when she made the other figures. In her occupations she is not the same, indeed. The family, long wanderers on the face of Europe, and idlers in galleries and churches, are housed once more under a roof of their own; and the little girl feels again the unwonted charm of the





kitchen, where a cook, very much to her mind, allows her unlimited pie-crust dough, and permits her to share in the high work of stoning raisins. These privileges distract her from the pursuit of art, but she does not enjoy them more simply; and she offers her tarts and fruit-cake to the family appreciation with apparently the same impersonal delight in their praise that she felt in their admiration of her saints and madonnas.

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